From Rights to Reconciliation
Acts 10:9-34
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The second Sunday in February has always been designated Race Relations Sunday. And the way the churches observe this particular day is a reliable reflector of the climate between the races, both inside and outside the church. Two decades ago Race Relations Sunday could be observed in the more daring congregations by means of a pulpit exchange. Nobody expected that the exercise would have much impact on the actual relations between races, but it did serve to make everyone feel good. One decade ago Rece Relations Sunday was observed in the midst of all the heat and controversy generated by the Civil Rights Movement. Lunch counter sit-ins, bus boycotts, fire hoses, cattle prods, mass demonstrations were in the papers everyday. The Church, ten years ago, was beginning to gear up and plunge into the foray. Ministers were travelling to Selma and Hattiesburg and getting arrested. Other ministers prayed for them, cheered them on from northern pulpits and got fired - which was in many ways worse than getting arrested.

Now it's 1971, and it is both tempting and very easy today to breeze right by Race Relations Sunday without so much as a word - for a number of reasons. First - some of the initial skirmishes have been won. Laws have been changed. In the areas of voting, housing, employment and education, the legal situation today is vastly different than it was ten years ago. Tremendous strides have been taken - and it's very easy to feel that the battle is over. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. But, I think the real reason we are inclined to ignore Race Relations Sunday is that the situation is so totally different today - on both sides - and we're not all sure what it is we ought to be saying and doing. In a sense, it is more painful than ever to observe this day in 1971.

It is painful today - if I may pontificate for a moment - bacause the time has come to move from rights to reconciliation. It is one thing to

support voter registration in Georgia. It is another thing altogether to think about reconciliation between my neighbor and myself. Reconciliation requires that conflict be expressed, and it is simply easier to look the other way: to avoid the expression of conflict: and to ignore Race Relations Sunday.

Well, let's not do that again this year. Let's take another look. Let's begin by expmining an important anecdote in the Book of Acts, and by attempting to put the whole issue within the context of the Christian Faith. There are many Biblical references which spell out our responsibility to and for our fellow man. From the prophet Amos: "Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." And Micah: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." In the New Testament Jesus taught the love and acceptance of all men. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance, illustrates the divine demand for love across racial, national, religious and culture lines. And the First Epistle of John sums it all up with surgical precision: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God..... If anyone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

I find the Scriptures pretty clear regarding my feelings, my responsibility and my behavior in relation to other men. But of all the textual material that might be appropriate on this day, none is quite as practical and personal as the strange story of Peter and Cornelius. It's a rather complex tale, so let me summarize.

Cornelius was a Roman military officer, from Italy, a Gentile, but a God-fearing man who was friendly to the Jews. That is, he believed in one God, and worshipped with the people and helped support the Synagog. But he was a gentile. Cornelius was moved to invite Peter to his home.

Peter, disciple of Jesus Christ, good Jew who lived by the law and who saw his new faith within the framework of Judaism was in the area. Peter - for whom association with Cornelius would have been unthinkable - had a

strange dream. In the dream he was commanded to kill and eat certain animals which the religious law categorized as unclean. When he protested he heard a voice saying: "It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean." The dream ended: Cornelius's messangers arrived inviting Peter to their masters home. And as they met, both moved by the Spirit of God, the pieces all fell into place for Peter. "I now see," he said, "how true it is that God has no favorites." The translation really is not adequate: the sense of the statement is: "Now I am catching on to what it really means." Peter knew, theoretically, that God was the father of all men. He knew, intellectually, that all men are equal in God's sight. But in the confrontation with the Gentile Cornelius that old concept suddenly became very practical. God was requiring of Peter that he violate an honored social custom, do something probably very distasteful to him, and that he change both his behavior and attitude toward a group of people he heretofore had considered unclean, inferior and undesirable.

I would suggest to you that the same God who moved Peter - who demanded that Peter change - who instigated a radical change in social custom - is very much behind the ferment on the racial scene today. I believe that God is moving men to change today. I believe that God, in his infinite wisdom, has chosen this particular time in history to correct an historical wrong. I believe that God, in his infinite wisdom, has chosen to do it by disturbing the calm waters of his church.

I believe God is shaking the traditional structures because the sad truth is that his church has not always been very consistant between what is says it believes - what it knows to be true, and what it actually does. In fact, the Church of Jesus Christ has a notoriously poor record in the past in Race Relations. But there is no sense belaboring that point. We know it's true. In the words of one perceptive observer: "It is possible that future historians may declare the irony of ironies - that in the middle of the 20th century, fight promoters and baseball managers did more for emancipating the Negroe than did the churchmen." [From T. B. Maston, The Bible and Race, p. 41]

Now let me pause at this point to share with you one of the very real a agonies of the ministry. I love the church: I love the Presbyterian Church: I love this congregation. And no one has to remind me that people get angry and quit the church when preachers start talking about race. No one has to tell me - in fact I am accutely aware of the fact - that most people don't come to church to hear about race relations. No one has to tell me that within this congregation - or any congregation on Sunday Morning - there are people who need the comfort of the Good News: who need the assurance of God's unfailing and eternal love: who need the support of a caring fellowship. I know that very well. The pain of the ministry is knowing that and wanting every week to be able to speak to it. The pain of the ministry is knowing and loving the people in it, and at the same time sensing deep inside, where one lives, that God is demanding that we change, that we be honest with him and ourselves, that we take very seriously the demands he places upon us as his children. The pain of honest churchmanship - clergy and laity - is in loving the church, yet knowing that love for God and his will is far more important.

In any case, the Church's record is not good. I believe God is judging and disturbing us at this point - and it is all happening in the midst of a radically different situation.

The Civil Rights movement of the early sixties was full of idealism and romanticism. If enough people got on the bandwagon: if enough people participated in pilgrimmages to the South: if enough letters were written to congressmen, Freedom Now would become an instant reality. More than any other man, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was responsible for that. It was carefully nonviolent, very moderate by today's standards, and oriented around the Christian Church. The high point came in 1963, at one of the largest gatherings Washington, D.C. has ever seen. And King's dream of a society in which all men would be brothers seemed almost within reach. I have portions of that speech on tape - and to hear it today is to weep at the hope which has now turned to

bitterness.

On the heels of 1963 came the assasinations, and something called backlash, and when all the smoke had cleared it became abundantly clear that while the law of the land had changed, the black man's plight looked very much the same. Hope turned to frustration: "We shall overcome" gave way to "Burn,Baby, Burn". Integration was replaced by Black Power: and in the newspapers people seldom saw reference to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Instead it was Malcolm X, Black Muslims and an organization that struck fear in the hearts of the whole nation - namely the Black Panthers.

The turning point came in the Spring of 1969. Listen to the words of Dr. Gayrand S. Wilmore, chairman of our own division of Church and Race.

"On Sunday, May 4, (1969) James Forman walked down the aisle of Riverside Church in New York City and hurled a series of demands at its minister and people. That dramatic confrontation with one of the historic symbols of white, middle class Protestantism precipitated perhaps the most serious crisis in the American religious establishment since the bitter polemics and antagonisms that divided it just prior to the Civil War." [The Church's Response to the Black Manifesto]

The liberals were stunned. The people who supported Civil Rights felt betrayed. The bigots rejoiced. And the people on the fence - scurried to get off and to join the swing to reaction and fatigue and apathy.

The whole Black Power movement did several things. It alienated a lot of whites. It identified integration and discrimination as white problems - not black. It called us racists and we didn't like that at all. But, most of all it freed the Black man from the anxiety of trying to squeeze into a system that didn't really want him - freed him to discover who he was, where he'd been, to reclaim the identity which had been meticulously stripped away by slavery and segragation, and to enjoy being black instead of trying to be white.

In the process, Black Americans, and hopefully white Americans learned

a surprising thing - there's nothing wrong with blackness. We learned, for instance, that the second book published by an American woman was a volume of poetry by Phylis Wheatly, a black woman who was brought here on a slave ship in 1761. We learned that Benjamin Banneker, a black man, distinguished himself in the 18th century as an astronomer, almanac-maker, surveyor, botanist, zoologist and philosopher. That this same man - whose name never made it into any history books, made important discoveries in the velocity of sound waves, wrote one of the first scholarly dissertations on bees, and helped to lay out the city of Washington, D.C.

We've learned that black scientists and inventors own more than 5,000 patents ranging from machine guns to devices for utilizing atomic energy: that a black man invented a telephone transmittor bought by Bell Telephone. We've learned that Dr. Percy Julian created the drug used to treat Glaucoma and that Dr. Charles Drew perfected the blood plasma technique that saved so many lives in World War II. We've learned that the first successful operation on the human heart was performed by a black Dr. Daniel Hale Williams - and that a black scientist made the key contribution to the computer inside X-15, America's first rocket ship.

We're learning that the black contribution to America has been immense: that somehow, this people we chained and brought here as slaves, this people we treated as property, this people we attacked at their most vulnerable point - marriage and the family - have survived and contributed mightly and significantly to our common culture.

Where do we go from here? I think we are going to be asked to stand aside sometimes and to let the black man find his own way. I think we're probably done with white solutions and that more and more we will have to allow the black man to make his own decisions and his own mistakes. I think we are going to have to stop paternalizing black people. I think we're going to have to admit that we live in a system that is racist: that white America is terribly responsible for the black ghetto - and that we have no right to demand white-

middle class behavior from people whose every energy has been sapped in the effort simply to survive. I think we're going to have to stop smarting when the people we called niggers call us racists. Institutionally, I think we're going to have to turn things around. And if you want an immediate illustration try a community that is seriously contemplating a public golf course on the banks of the Wabash, but that can't afford to patch the streets where black people live - or to provide community centers and social services other than those two modieval hovels and the understaffed, under paid mockery now in existence in Lafayette, Indiana.

But most of all, we've got a lot of attitudes to change, beginning with our own. And why? First, for the sake of our nation. Consider this little vignette from a paper I read recently [A Certain Dark Joy]

"Ten years from now or twenty years from now when blacks comprise from one-third to more than one-half of our major cities, a bill is coming due. Sooner or later, the commonwealth is going to have to decide between the American idea or Fascism." For the sake of the nation! Thomas Jefferson once said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." We're in the middle of a revolution and where it all ends depends on the attitudes of millions of white, middle class people like you and me. What's at stake? Ideas like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness: ideas like "one nation uder God with liberty and justice for all." Why change? For the sake of the nation: but deeper than that, far more important than that - because you and I stand under a cross: a cross that means one God who created all, loves all enough to die for all; a cross the shadow of which makes all men brothers who would stand beneath it.

An apocryphal story is told about the occasion when Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Charles Evans Hughes walked down the aisle in a large Washington church to become a member. He was joined before the altar by a pipe fitter and a Chinese laundryman. The minister, looking at the three of them, is said to have remarked, "Isn't it amazing how level the ground is at the foot of the

cross?"

Why change? Because Jesus Christ died for you and your brother; and because he has made you responsible to and for your brother regardless of the color of his skin.

Friday was the anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. I would conclude with words of his which are, I believe, among the most timeless ever uttered. He spoke them to the Congress of the United States on December 1, 1862. They bear repeating - for they speak eloquently to you and me now.

"The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew..... In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free..... Fellow citizens we cannot escape history. We will be remembered in spite of ourselves..... We - even we here - hold the power and bear the responsibility ..... The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just - a way which, if followed, the world will ever applaud, and God must forever bless."

Amen.

Our father, God, we confess that it is not easy to change. Forgive us when we fail. Continue to disturb us with your spirit so that each of us may rise to this new occasion. For we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who died for all men, our Lord.

Amen